

Post, N.Y. Times Set Briefing Policy

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In a developing controversy over government information practices, editors of The Washington Post and The New York Times issued new instructions to their staffs yesterday regarding official "background briefings."

Declaring that it is the newspaper's policy to insist on public accountability for the public business, Executive Editor Benjamin C. Bradlee of The Washington Post instructed his staff to insist "through every means available" that government news briefings be "on the record," with statements by officials fully attributable to those who utter them.

If the officials refuse to be quoted directly, Bradlee said, Post reporters will seek attribution "specific enough that no readers can reasonably be confused."

If the problem still cannot be resolved, Bradlee said, Post reporters have been instructed to inform the agency or official that the newspaper's handling of the material will be determined by the editors' judgment of their responsibility to inform the public.

"We believe that responsibility cannot be transferred by us to any public official or circumscribed by government edict," Bradlee said. He added that while certain circumstances may make full attribution impractical, the public interest is not served by policy statements of faceless officials.

The new Post policy is limited to briefings initiated by officials and does not apply to contacts with officials or other

news sources when these contacts are initiated by Post reporters, Bradlee added.

Managing Editor A. M. Rosenthal of The New York Times, in a policy statement to the paper's Washington bureau, declared that the press "backgrounder" has been abused to the point that it is "a way of life" and often an obstacle rather than an aid to the full flow of information.

While it is quite proper for reporters to seek information on a confidential basis and to protect the confidentiality of sources, Rosenthal said, the problem arises when officials or politicians call journalists together "simply to float trial balloons or to present an attitude or a policy without taking the responsibility for standing behind them by permitting the source to be revealed."

"In effect the press attends a press conference and reports on it without saying who gave it. The result often is concealment of sources not on the basis of real need for confidentiality, but to suit the political or diplomatic convenience of the government or political sources," he said.

Rosenthal said The Times had laid down no flat rules covering all situations, but called on Times reporters and editors to be "a lot more selective" about attending official backgrounders.

The Times managing editor said the movement should be toward attending background briefings "only when the reporters and editors themselves believe there is an important reason beyond the source's convenience for not making the information attributable to the person or government department involved."

Stanley Karnow, a diplomatic reporter for The Post, and Washington correspondent James H. McCartney of Knight Newspapers walked out of the State Department's daily news briefing yesterday when the government spokesman put some information on a "background" basis.

Karnow had served notice at the start of the briefing that he would leave if the spokesman, Robert J. McCloskey, put anything on a not-for-attribution basis.

McCloskey outlined his position by saying, "I am entitled in a briefing to go on traditional background or not answer a question."

The State Department Correspondents Association, made up of journalists who normally cover diplomatic news, has called a meeting for 11 a.m. today at the State department to consider the problem of "background" briefings.

Derick Daniels, news director of the 11 Knight newspapers, declared in a statement last night that "our Washington staff is committed to the clearest possible identification of sources of information." While recognizing that certain circumstances may require printing of unattributed information, Daniels said, "we intend to resist abuses."